

# Grandmother God

Steph Chandler Burns

## Introduction

Identifying as queer and Mennonite is both gift and difficulty. These dual, sometimes at-odds identities often clash or confuse one another. They can create wedges in how I find I can interact with the wider church or other people and even in my own healthy interactions with myself. But do not be mistaken: these difficulties do not come from being queer. Knowing God to have created me with love and seeing that even in the parts of myself that the church would reject have long brought me closer to God. Self-exploration, reflection, and discernment on these two, often competing, parts of identity have been a beautiful and fruitful piece of my life and my relationship to a God of love, compassion, and justice.

In recent years I've come to realize the ways that pieces of our identities can show us parts of who God is. My experience as a white, middle-class, bisexual, non-binary, queer, Mennonite, Christian person has influenced my understanding of the divine. I have begun writing intentionally to include both themes of faith and sexuality in the same work. My poetry explores topics of faith, sexuality, belonging, lament, pain, and exclusion and reflects my journey to find my place of belonging within the body of Christ. Given that LGBTQ+ folks still have fewer spots at the proverbial table in faith discussions, power ends up being a key theme throughout my poetry. What does it mean to seek power as someone on the margins of the church? Whose voices are heard, and who needs others to advocate for them? What does it mean to find a voice in the church? This poem is not meant to get into the weeds of making an argument for LGBTQ+ inclusion. It is not meant to prove that the church is not yet a safe place for LGBTQ+ voices, or even to explain queer theory or theology, as these things are handled in more detail elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Instead, this poem shares a few glimpses of my own experiences with being queer and Christian.

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1 See, for example, Steph Chandler Burns, "Nonbinary Identity in Ruth and the Restructuring of Power," in *I've Got the Power: Naming and Reclaiming Power as a Source for Good*, edited by Jenny Castro (Elkhart: Women in Leadership Project, Mennonite Church USA, 2018), , 95–106, and my other works delving into queer and Mennonite identity in more depth.

This poem is about my grandparents, who were active in the early days of LGBTQ+ advocacy in the Mennonite Church. They and other advocates in the mid-to-late 1980s began the work of trying to make room for LGBTQ+ people in the Mennonite Church.<sup>2</sup> I am deeply grateful for the previous generations of advocates and justice workers who began paving the way for the level of acceptance and welcome that I do get to experience today. My own grandparents have taught me something of God: God is a grandmother. She is fiercely loving of her grandchildren and stands up to anyone who would exclude them. More than anything, she wants her beloved grandchildren to thrive in a church that loves them as much as she does.

### **Grandmother God**

I remember the day I learned  
 my grandma was a feminist  
 how much less alone I felt knowing  
 this really is in my blood

and grandma,  
 in fighting by resisting  
 the norms placed on her and her children  
 in quietly, in her way  
 standing up to the world, proclaiming:  
 “this is not okay”

made room  
 for queer little me at the table  
 for me to own my voice  
 in echoing her lament:  
 “this is not okay”

and in so doing  
 ushering, birthing

Her kingdom come  
 On earth as in heaven

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on this history, see Dave Rogalsky, “A Voice from Outside the Gate,” *Canadian Mennonite* 21, no. 7, March 22, 2017, 19.

## About the author

Steph Chandler Burns, MTS (Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario), works as a pastor with young adults on the margins of church. Steph is bisexual, queer, non-binary, and very opinionated. Steph has published theological reflections on being queer and Mennonite and enjoys thinking about the ways that queerness reveals parts of the divine. When not engaging with church, Steph can be found playing board games or getting new tattoos. Steph lives with a partner, Greg, and their cat, Lulu, in Kitchener, Ontario, on the Haldimand Tract, the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Attawandaron First Peoples.

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